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ABSTRACT

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The Role of Religious Beliefs in Early Childhood Education: Christian and Buddhist Preschools in Japan

Susan D. Holloway

Abstract

The views of teachers and directors in four Christian preschools and four Buddhist preschools are examined in this qualitative study of early childhood education in Japan. In Christian preschools, the guiding principle was that each child was a precious gift of God. This belief resulted in a play-oriented curriculum that maximized the choices available to children. Teachers also attempted to encourage children's creativity and their ability to formulate thoughts and express them to others. A particular focus was helping children appreciate each other as individuals and learn to form relationships based upon that appreciation. In Buddhist preschools, the curriculum was designed to strengthen children's virtue, intellect, and physical well-being. Activities were teacher structured, with an emphasis on attaining literacy and numeracy skills. Lessons were delivered in a whole group context, with an emphasis on absorbing content rather than encouraging personal exploration and expression. The clear implications of these different religious perspectives suggest that similar analyses be undertaken in the United States, where very little research has been conducted on church-based preschools.

Introduction

The United States is one of the most religious countries in the world, with a majority of the population claiming affiliation with a religious group. After a historical period of relatively strict separation between church and state, religious values are again beginning to receive explicit recognition in some public educational settings. For example, Congress recently voted to allow the Ten Commandments to be posted in public school classrooms. Additionally, many states are debating whether to allocate public funds to charter schools sponsored by religious organizations, another breach in the wall of separation (Fuller, in press).

In the research literature on K-12 schooling, there has been a growing scrutiny of religious schools. One focus has been on the manner in which the values inherent in the religious doctrine are embodied in the expectations for teachers, students, and parents, including such issues as student comportment in and

out of school, teachers' discipline practices, and the nature of teachers' communication with parents. Research in Catholic schools suggests that children benefit when parents and staff communicate with each other and share such values as commitment to hard work and respectful behavior toward adults (e.g., Bauch, 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). The literature on home schooling has also begun to track the role of religious values in shaping curriculum and pedagogical practices (Huerta, in press).

In contrast to this burgeoning literature in the K-12 area, there has been little attention to the functioning of early childhood programs that operate under religious auspices. A few studies of child care quality have included religious affiliation as a variable, and so far the findings have been rather contradictory. In the National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989), for example, researchers found that church-sponsored centers paid higher wages than for-profit centers, but they lagged behind nonreligious, nonprofit centers in the provision of other employee benefits. On the other hand, analysis of a national survey of nearly 2,000 centers found that employee salaries were lower in church-related centers than in any other type, and the analysis also found less evidence of a planned curriculum and parent participation in church-related centers than in any other type (Fuller, Raudenbush, Wei, & Holloway, 1993).

Work to date has not closely investigated the goals and expectations of staff at church-based schools, nor have studies assessed aspects of children's learning and development that may be most relevant to the goals of the schools. More research, particularly in the form of qualitative investigations, is needed to better understand the ways in which the "rules for living" espoused within various religious organizations are instantiated in preschool organizations.

In the study reported here, a qualitative approach was utilized to understand the goals, values, and expectations of Japanese early childhood education programs affiliated with Christianity and Buddhism. By talking at length with teachers and directors of these programs, I sought to understand how their values were embodied in the practices and curricula of the schools. These data underscore the importance of understanding how collectively held belief systems inform educational practice.

The system of early childhood education in Japan is quite extensive. Over 90% of Japanese children attend at least 2 years of a licensed preschool (*youchien*) or child care center (*hoikuen*) (Boocock, 1989). Public preschools are funded by state and local government (with some tuition contributed by parents), but approximately 80% of children attend private preschools, some of which are affiliated with a religious organization (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 1994). All preschools and child care centers are subject to oversight by the national government, which develops regulations pertaining to such issues as the dimensions and basic facilities available and the level of required teacher preparation. However, preschool directors have considerable latitude in formulating their own programs, resulting in more diversity in the areas of materials, activities, and curriculum than is seen at any other stage in the Japanese educational system (Peak, 1991; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity, which have been intertwined with each other for over a century in Japan, create a rich tapestry of spiritual and philosophical thought that has had a profound impact on the nature of preschools (Wollons, 1993). (Note 1)

The theoretical basis of this study is located in the literature at the intersection of anthropology and psychology (Shweder et al., 1998). In this literature, individuals involved in the socialization and education of young children are presumed to hold cultural models that guide their actions (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1995). Cultural models are "presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it . . . [and which] frame experience, supplying interpretations of that experience and inferences about it, and

[provide] goals for action" (Quinn & Holland, 1987, p. 10). Cultural models include beliefs or conceptual schemas (e.g., "children should be seen and not heard") as well as behavioral scripts (e.g., steps to take when a child acts in an aggressive manner toward a peer) (D'Andrade, 1992; Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). However, cultural models are not necessarily associated with broad social categories like nation or ethnicity (Kondo, 1990); they can be generated within smaller social units as well (e.g., working class families in the Shitamachi section of Tokyo). Furthermore, for important topics like rearing and educating children, a number of cultural models are available in a given community. This cultural "pool" of beliefs and practices may contain elements that are in tension, or even in fundamental conflict, with each other (Kojima, 1986, 1988). Within Japanese preschools affiliated with religious organizations, there may therefore be sharply divergent models as to how human relations should be organized and socialized in young children (see also Shore, 1996; Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997).

Sample and Methods

The data are drawn from interviews and observations conducted in 1994 and 1995 in 32 early childhood settings (27 preschools, 5 child care centers) in Tokyo and the Kansai area, which includes the major cities of Osaka and Kobe. Introductions to site directors were provided by officials in the regional association of private preschools and by colleagues in local universities. (Note 2) The sample was selected to ensure variation across type (preschool, child care center), location (urban, suburban), and auspice (private, public).

The visit to each setting included an observation of approximately 1 hour in a classroom serving 4-year-olds and an interview with the director and one or more teachers, conducted by the author and a Japanese bilingual associate. (Note 3) The open-ended interview, which lasted from 1 to 3 hours, was designed to probe cultural models regarding goals of the preschool experience, theories about the role of the teacher in facilitating learning, views about discipline and control, details of the curriculum and activities, and perceptions about the family and its relationship with early childhood education. The observations were used as a source of examples to deepen these extended conversations. All interviews were tape recorded; in addition, detailed notes were kept during the interview.

Subsequent to the first round of data collection, a deductive process of preliminary data analysis occurred. Field notes and interview notes were reviewed and analyzed using a preliminary coding framework. Initial data displays were developed—within-case displays were created to highlight the key cultural models in each preschool, and cross-case displays were used to highlight differences and similarities across preschools (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the second round of data collection, 3 schools were selected from the pool of 27 preschools. The author and a Japanese associate spent at least 5 days in each setting, observing in a classroom of 4-year-olds and conducting further interviews with staff. A running record was kept during the observations, with the focus being a description of the teacher's activities and utterances. Field and interview notes were reviewed regularly to develop hypotheses that could be probed in subsequent interviews and observations (Strauss, 1987).

At the end of the data collection period, all interviews were translated and transcribed by a bilingual Japanese doctoral student in education. The original Japanese terms used for key childrearing and educational concepts were retained along with the translated equivalents. A coding system was developed that permitted sections of narrative to be tagged with global categories (e.g., goals, activities, teacher-child relations, discipline, role of the parent, and issues of individualism and group orientation). The transcriptions were then coded using a qualitative software package.

The final stage of analysis involved a number of activities. First, all passages associated with each of the key codes were examined to obtain a sense of the variation that existed within each code. Next, the entire corpus of transcripts and field notes was reviewed to learn how the categories fit together at each school. A matrix was generated listing the central findings pertaining to each category for each preschool. These steps resulted in the confirmation of earlier hypotheses about the clusters of cultural models that were shared by subgroups of the preschool staff. Brief case studies of particular schools were written to use as a point of discussion in focus groups and informal interviews with Japanese informants—including parents, parent educators, and faculty in departments of psychology and early childhood education. Reactions and commentary from these informants as well as field notes and written material provided by the preschools (i.e., curriculum guides, parent newsletters, and promotional materials) were used to understand and contextualize the interview data. This paper is built primarily upon the comments of directors and teachers from four Buddhist preschools and four Christian preschools (Catholic and Presbyterian).

Findings

Christian Preschools

Directors in each type of school articulated cultural models that guided their school's curriculum and vision of appropriate practice. We begin this discussion with the Christian schools. Although these schools spanned a variety of denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, they shared a number of cultural models that informed their programs. The amount of time devoted specifically to learning about Christianity varied among the schools. Most schools included a daily morning prayer and a prayer before and after meals. Attending a church service of some kind once a week was common. In the more actively religious schools, there was a designated time for listening to Bible stories. At Christmas, they engaged in a number of activities; for example, literature samples obtained from two Catholic preschools each feature a photograph of the Christmas performance, which was an enactment of the Nativity. Although the schools spanned a variety of denominations, including Catholic and Protestant organizations, the staff held a number of cultural models in common.

The Christian directors built their programs around the view that God's love is the primary message of Christianity. According to this central cultural model, children are gifts from God, and each one should therefore be highly appreciated (*hitori hitori o taisetsu ni*). For example, Ms. Watanabe, director of Hikari preschool, expressed the following sentiment:

> *Jesus Christ delivered God's message of love. The love of God means that God loves each individual child. Each individual child is precious because he or she is a gift sent by God. Through his or her parents, each individual child is delivered by God. We sincerely appreciate God's production of children.*

Children at a Christian preschool practice a song for an upcoming performance.

This cultural model had two direct implications for the daily routine at Christian preschools. One way of respecting the individual was to allow the children considerable freedom in deciding what they wanted to do. Accordingly, free play formed the basis of the curriculum in all the Christian schools. For instance, as he came to realize the fundamental importance of individual self-determination in Western religious thought, Mr. Kobayashi, director of Arima preschool, became more and more convinced that it was essential to avoid teacher-centered activities:

> *We respect children's spontaneous activity (*jihatsuteki koudou*). In the past, the children went to the chapel once a week to pray. They had to walk with their hands folded. It was teacher centered, and the adults ordered the children around. The children tried to respond properly. I tried to destroy that atmosphere. I didn't like it because . . . the teacher's desire was different from the desires of the children. If the children aren't paying attention during a story, it means it is not interesting to them—and the teacher shouldn't just tell them to be quiet.*

A second implication was that the teachers placed a priority on encouraging children to articulate their own ideas and to integrate their views with those of their classmates. For example, the teachers at Arima held a class discussion after every art period to elicit children's opinions and ideas about the morning's activities. I observed Ms. Nagatomi, a teacher from Arima, handle such a class meeting for the purpose of discussing a "junk art" project in which children used tape and glue to create individual objects from household items like egg cartons and tissue paper boxes. The projects were imaginative and intricate: a peacock whose tail could stand up when pulled with an attached string; a cardboard jewelry box with tissue paper cut into small squares and pasted to resemble stained glass; a serving of assorted sushi, complete with rosette of ginger and a wedge of plastic grass. Ms. Nagatomi picked up each project and asked its creator to say something about it. She then built on the child's comment, sometimes soliciting suggestions from the class as to how the project could be extended or how problems the creator had experienced could be solved. This carefully conducted discussion is consistent with the Arima philosophy of combining individual attention with developing an awareness of others and skills in interacting with them. As this glimpse indicates, the teachers were careful to nurture the children's imagination and self-expression, both artistic and verbal. But Ms. Nagatomi was careful to balance this focus on the individual with attention to how the children interacted in the group context.

> *Three-year-olds just tend to put a couple of boxes side by side and say, "That's it." . . . But only they themselves know what they are making. Then they realize that others may see*

*their creations differently. They realize the importance of how the other party sees their productions. Through the creation of a work, they learn to develop a common understanding (*kyoutsuu rikai*). This is my goal. . . . Instead of one child learning a particular subject, we try to involve all the children in the shared learning.*

Children use tape during a "junk art" activity at a Christian preschool.

Teachers in Christian preschools were particularly welcoming of children with disabilities because they felt it was valuable for the nondisabled children to encounter someone who had characteristics that differed quite saliently from their own. Through daily interactions with children who were different from them in some ways, the students were thought to gain an appreciation for each individual but also to learn how to form relationships in spite of those differences. As the teacher at Arima said:

As you may have noticed, we have a handicapped child in the class. I pay particular attention to that child, but I also ask other children, "Please help him while I am working with these other children." At first, his learning or working speed was very different from the others. Because of that, he had difficulty in getting along with them. Gradually, however, he became involved with other children. In that process, the children came to understand each individual's differences and started to acknowledge each individual's characteristics. I think this process applies to children's mutual interactions in general.

Perhaps because of the connection that their religious beliefs provided to Western thoughts and values, the directors of Christian preschools that I visited were more interested in learning about and adapting Western theories of early childhood education than were directors in other preschools. For example, Ms. Ishida, the director at Aizawa preschool, had sought wide exposure to Western theories of early childhood education. She had attended classes in the Montessori method, although the major emphasis of her training at a local Christian college had been on the methods of Froebel. She was also exploring in workshops the ideas of constructivists like Constance Kamii and was cautiously implementing new strategies for fostering children's emergent literacy, even though they appeared to contradict the Ministry of Education's policy of leaving literacy to the elementary schools. Activities on the day I

visited presented many opportunities to build literacy skills. The 4-year-old children were making vegetable soup with a recipe that featured written directions accompanied by pictures. The 5-year-old children were re-creating their experience at a summer fair. Using large cardboard boxes, they constructed food stalls and activity booths. Their writing skills came into play as they created signs, menus, price lists, and other artifacts.

A parent volunteer reads with two students at a Catholic preschool.

Montessori materials are available at this Catholic preschool.

Not surprisingly, the Christian preschools were the most similar to American schools of any that I visited. The cultural models inherent in Christian thought have obviously permeated the views of children in the United States to a profound extent. However, it should be noted that these models have been interpreted by Japanese early childhood educators and combined with Japanese cultural models; this appropriation process results in an orientation toward strengthening the individual's powers of self-expression, fostering self-knowledge, and cultivating personal interests—but the teachers expect children to use these skills to build relationships and form the ability to function well in group settings. This dual emphasis on individual development and social connection makes these schools likely to serve as models of good practice for American educators, who are apt to value these particular cultural models (see also Kotloff, 1993).

Buddhist Preschools

From the front, the Tennoji Buddhist Preschool building looks more like an insurance company than a preschool. The imposing modern structure is three stories high, with many windows whose darkened glass prevents outsiders from seeing in. Yet, when one moves through the entryway and passes through the hall to the play yard, the peaked, tile roof of a traditional Buddhist temple looms into view. A close examination of the school philosophy at Tennoji and the other Buddhist schools reveals how three traditional elements of Buddhist thought have been artfully synthesized with modern preoccupations about preparation for elementary school.

*Virtue (*toku*) as a Goal of Preschooling.* The essence of virtue, according to the staff at Tennoji, was in developing a sense of consideration for others (*itawari no kokoro*). They felt that kindness and consideration should be extended to all living things, including animals and plant life as well as humans. They emphasized this message in the weekly prayer service at the temple, and they provided practical experiences, like caring for the preschool's plants and animals.

Children attend a service at the Buddhist temple associated with the preschool.

The emphasis on showing consideration for others is consistent with Buddhist teachings on compassion. For Buddhists, both wisdom and compassion are needed to help relieve the pain and suffering of the human condition. Buddhist ethics include "a deep sensitivity to the life of the cosmos, an ecological consciousness which combines esthetic refinement with a sense of responsibility" (Dumoulin, 1994, p. 65). Japanese Buddhism is particularly explicit in its strong emphasis on compassion. For example, one of the strongest and oldest schools of Japanese Buddhism, the Shingon sect, urges its followers to practice Four Embracing Acts: charity, kind speech, beneficial acts, and adapting oneself to others.

For the director at Suma Buddhist preschool, informal daily prayer was another important vehicle for teaching compassion:

> *Through a variety of activities, we would like children to appreciate the spirit of Buddha. Putting one's hand together in prayer is the most important activity, particularly in today's*

> *society. . . . We teach the children Buddhist song and show them how to offer flowers to the altar celebrating Buddha's birth. . . . Obviously, young children do not understand a deep philosophy like this, but I want teachers to convey gentle feelings to the children. Through activities, we would like the children to appreciate gentle feelings. . . . Japanese put their hands together in prayer before eating a meal. They take doing so for granted. In Christianity, people say "Amen," which corresponds to the Buddhist chant of "*Namuamidaibutsu.*" A sense of gratitude is what we should consider most important. But it is today's Japanese people that tend to forget the importance of this activity, which is the foundation in life . . . children should extend their gratitude and then have a meal. Also they should extend their gratitude to their parents. They acquire this as a habit and this is most important.*

The Buddhist directors tried to be gentle in their exhortations about prayer as the means for developing a mind of appreciation. However, they were also quick to point out that Buddhism called for strength and determination as well as kindness:

> *Raising cheerful, gentle, and healthy children (*akaruku sunao genki na kodomo*) is our overall philosophy. This is from the Buddhist belief in which being strong, happy, and gentle is emphasized. You might think that in Buddhism you are generous to everything. This is not necessarily true. Living in a strong way is important in Buddhism. By being strong, I mean that one should do anything with confidence and determination.*

The view among the Buddhist directors I spoke with was that children were like wild animals and needed to be tamed in preschool. At Tennoji, 3-year-old children were considered to be a particular challenge because they do not understand the school rules, resulting in a situation that is "chaotic" and leaves teachers feeling as if they are "fighting a war." As one teacher put it:

> *I try to tame one child after another every day. I first try to tame those children who seem to adapt easily. I may tame one child today but may not be able to do so tomorrow. . . . By July [4 months into the school year], all the children have become calm and quiet except for a couple of children who are still naughty. . . . By now [November], they are calm and quiet.*

One of the least desirable characteristics of the unsocialized person, according to the directors, was a tendency to act in a selfish, egocentric manner. Therefore, the staff members at the Buddhist preschools were careful to enforce desired behavior firmly. As the director of Suma explained:

> *I am afraid to say that Japanese people have not yet developed the notion of democracy. If children are left as they are, they tend to be selfish. Japanese people in general tend to equate democracy with being self-centered. Japanese tend to ignore discipline unless they are told to observe discipline. When it comes to developing children's individual character (*kosei*), I think it is important to allow them to play freely and at the same time to discipline them. But children tend to do only what they want. They tend to seek self-centered individualism. They tend to ignore the notion of love or empathy (*omoiyari*). Thus we tend to feel that we need to control children. This is a very important aspect of Japanese education.*

In this passage, the director of Suma argues that Japanese people are by nature selfish and that they need structured socialization experiences to become "human" rather than animalistic. This view contrasts sharply with the opinions of the Christians, who emphasized the idea that children are "precious gifts"

from God. It is interesting that Japanese Christian early childhood educators hold this benign view, while the Buddhists articulate a more negative view of human nature, one that is similar to that of conservative Christian educators in the United States. The view of many evangelical American Christians is that adults must be vigilant to prevent children from succumbing to the wickedness that is the legacy of the original sin (Cleverly & Phillips, 1986).

Another strategy for avoiding individualism was to feature large group activities as much as possible. In a pamphlet for parents, the director makes an argument for large class sizes: "I suspect that most of you [mothers] think that small class sizes, such as 5 or 10 children per teacher, are better for your children. I do not think so. Among 20 or 30 peers in a class, the children are more motivated to learn by competing with each other. Therefore, class sizes of 5 or 10 students are not good at all. Of course, parental overprotectiveness (*kahogo*) is not good. Children aged 4 to 5 need a group" [translation].

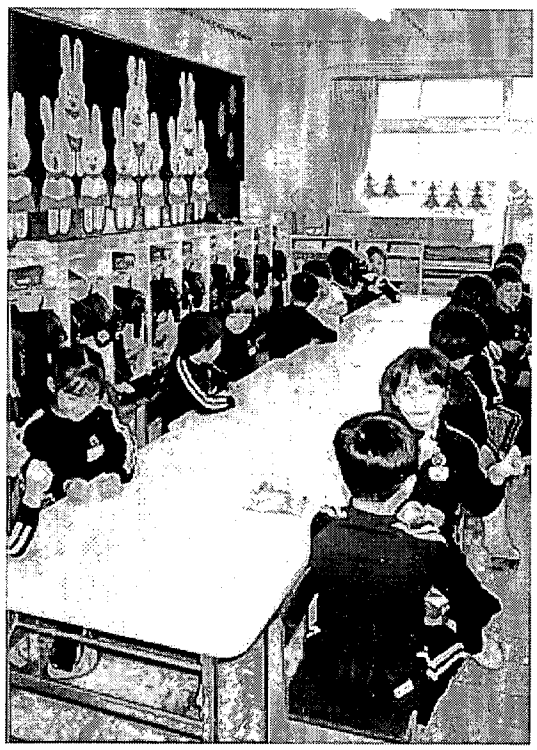
Another component of the group orientation is developing the child's weak points rather than allowing him or her to focus on strengths, again illustrated in the parent brochure: "Young children need balanced care that focuses on various aspects of development such as music, intelligence, creativity, and health (physical ability). In a *youchien* there are future artists and future scholars. There are also future athletes, and yet it is not a good idea to develop only their athletic abilities. If you improve only the musical ability of a child who is good at music, this child will have unbalanced overall ability" [translation].

Children at a Buddhist preschool learn to play the drums.

*Obtaining Knowledge (*chi*).* Buddhists have traditionally focused on wisdom and faith as the key to salvation, in contrast to the Christian doctrine of love. Buddhism holds that ignorance, in combination with desire, are the forces that prevent people from moving beyond the pain of life on earth. A primary strategy for attaining knowledge is to study sacred texts. The texts themselves are considered authoritative, so the believer is a "hearer of the word." Expression of Buddhist faith has traditionally focused on "pious copying out of scripture," a practice that is still considered meritorious (Dumoulin, 1994, p. 55). Schools established by Buddhist monks from the 18th to the 19th centuries featured

intensive study of classical texts (Sato, 1998).

In the Buddhist preschools I visited, students were strongly encouraged to orient themselves toward external sources of knowledge, including both texts and the teacher. At Tennoji, this approach was partly illustrated by the children's memorization of sacred chants. In addition, they spend most of their day sitting at desks receiving instruction from the teacher. Literacy is a major focus of the curriculum, including instruction in reading *kanji* (Chinese characters) and writing *hiragana* (the simplified syllabary). Children engage in poetry reading and writing, and they learn the basics of grammar. They are involved in activities for the purpose of "developing their intelligence" (*chi no kaihatsu*), in which a wide range of materials are used to stimulate basic cognitive skills such as visual perception and memory, as well as such Piagetian principles as seriation and class inclusion. In addition, children attend classes in art, ballet, English, instrumental music, and choral singing.



Children pair up for a game at a Buddhist preschool.

Children use glue and markers during an art activity at a Buddhist preschool.

At Sannomiya preschool, a more radical curriculum emphasizes decontextualized cognitive stimulation. Children are exposed to complex visual and auditory patterns, which they memorize, with no exploration of the meaning of the stimuli. For example, in one exercise, teachers clap out a complicated rhythm for children to repeat. Children are shown flash cards representing the flags of nations around the world and call out the name of the appropriate country. They memorize poetry in archaic Japanese. According to the director, a Buddhist monk, the purpose of these activities is not to learn facts, but rather to receive brain stimulation in a rhythmic, fast-paced tempo:

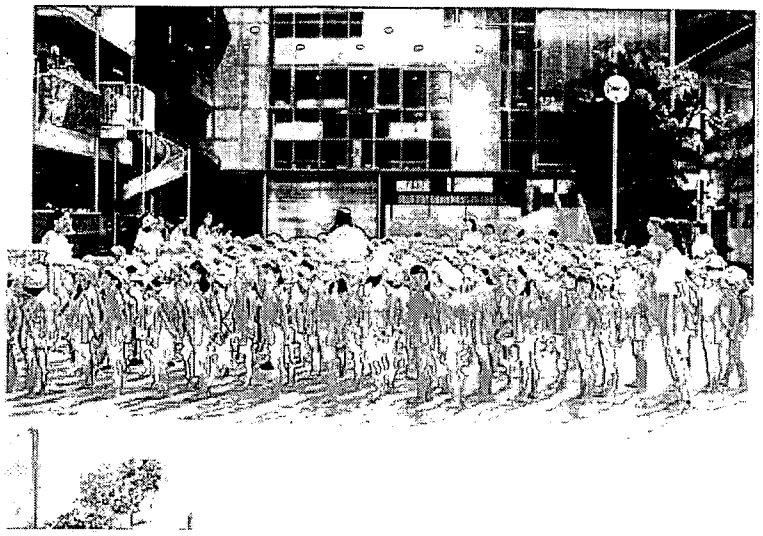
> *Cramming children's heads with knowledge is wrong. What children need is intellectual stimulation, as can be seen in what we do with children's language development. Visual stimuli represented by literacy are important so that children absorb many things from the environment. Children's brain functioning is strengthened by absorbing a lot of things from their environment.*

This approach to learning is consistent with what Hori (1994) calls "ritual formalism," the method used for teaching in Japanese Zen monasteries: "By ritual formalism, I am stretching one term to cover several kinds of behavior: repetition, rote memorization, behaving according to traditional prescription. In ritual formalism, students imitate form without necessarily understanding content or rationale. They are instructed in 'what' to do but given very little instruction in 'why' and 'how' to do it" (p. 21).

What unites the Buddhist preschools, then, is an emphasis on the ultimate authority of text and teacher as the source of knowledge. This view contrasts with the Christian emphasis that knowledge results from children's individual exploration in combination with teacher-guided social interaction among peers.

*The Significance of the Body (*tai*).* In the Zen tradition, composing one's body for meditation—sitting and breathing correctly—is crucial practice for attaining higher consciousness. By emptying oneself of physical discomfort, emotions, and thoughts, one achieves unity of mind and body and detachment from the self. Analysis of the moral implications of the physical state is commonplace in Japan, in Buddhist as well as secular contexts. In many of the preschools, not just those that were Buddhist, the children were constantly reminded to sit up straight and keep their feet together. In the Buddhist preschools, posture was just one of the concerns directors expressed about the physical development of the children. At Sannomiya preschool, for example, the children sat on benches rather than chairs in order to strengthen their back muscles and prevent them from lounging. They received constant reminders about how to position and move their bodies. When the teacher called attendance, for example, each child was required to raise his hand upon hearing his name. The teacher watched to be sure the child's arm was pitched at the proper angle, with fingers together and straight. The Tennoji preschool's pamphlet explicitly links posture and spirituality: "Going to the shrine makes one's spine straighten. One feels renewed, formal, and serious. One grows in appreciation for Buddha who protects us all" [translation].

Because much of the day was occupied with academic classes and music instruction, the children at strict Buddhist preschools had little opportunity to engage in physical activity. When it did occur, physical exertion was routinized and teacher structured. For example, children at Sannomiya preschool received direct instruction in how to shinny up a pole. Six children at a time approached their respective poles and waited at the bottom. Upon a signal from the teacher, they shinnied up and held their position until she blew her whistle, at which time they slid down and yielded to the next group. Physical activities at Buddhist preschools were sometimes designed to provide a challenge that would help toughen the children. This was especially true at Sannomiya preschool, where the director purposely designed a field trip to include experiences that would be physically challenging for the children.



Children line up for morning exercises at a Buddhist preschool.

The directors in the Buddhist preschools were also concerned about the spiritual and physical effects of receiving proper nutrition and exercise. The director at Sannomiya was concerned that Japanese children were overweight, out of shape, and "mentally sloppy" due to inactivity and poor diet. He deplored mothers who wished their children to be excused from strenuous exercise because of being "too weak":

> *My response [to such mothers] is, "If you insist on [exempting your children from physical activity] you must be sure that you can take full responsibility for your child's entire life." I would say, "Your child is not intrinsically weak. Instead, you have made him weak because you did not give him opportunities or experiences."*

A notation on the brochure for Tennoji preschool sums up the connection between nutrition, group orientation, and spiritual awareness. A list of five positive attributes of their preschool included the following: "The perfect lunch system!! Everyone eats the same thing, and everyone eats everything that is served because we are showing our appreciation to the living things whose lives we are taking."

The Buddhist schools I visited were among the largest of any schools that I saw; some had over 600 pupils. If the present economic uncertainties continue, these schools will likely continue to be a very appealing method for parents interested in giving their children a head start in school. On the other hand, their espousal of conservative political philosophy and adherence to traditional values may drive away parents with no personal knowledge of or fondness for the pre-War days (Allison, 1996). The demands for obedience are at odds with a powerful cultural model that sees children under 7 as little treasures that should be treated indulgently (Boocock, 1989), a model that may have become even stronger in recent times (Vogel, 1996).

Conclusion

The Japanese are sometimes described in Western writing as a nonreligious people. But it is more accurate to say that Japanese people express religiosity in a way that differs from that of Americans. Japanese appear more willing to mix and match religions, often invoking Shinto at birth and marriage, and Buddhism when faced with death. Yet, in spite of factors that work to blur the distinct philosophical

contribution of the various religions, we have seen concrete ways in which the ideologies of Christianity and Buddhism continue to influence Japanese preschools.

The clear effects of religious beliefs on the curricula and practices in these preschools suggest that similar analyses of American preschools are warranted. In the past decade, researchers and policy experts have been grappling with the feasibility of a global definition of child care quality that could be applied across all institutions in any community across the country. The elements of "appropriate practice" have been articulated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These recommended practices were based primarily upon the child development research literature, as well as practitioner experiences (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This viewpoint tends to privilege the "scientific" approach to raising children, with little explicit recognition of the fact that collectively based ideologies—including religious beliefs—may proscribe values and practices that conflict with the approach favored by many researchers. At the current time, there is so little information available about the philosophical bases, and favored practices, of church-based schools that it is impossible to speculate on the nature of possible tensions. As early childhood educators increasingly advocate moving toward "partnerships" and "dialogues" between early childhood educators and parents (Holloway & Fuller, 1999)—with each contributing their perspectives and knowledge to the conversation—the exploration of the role of religious beliefs will be increasingly imperative.

Notes

1. It is rather difficult to obtain a clear sense of the number of religious preschools in Japan. Many preschools that are housed on the grounds of religious organizations are not particularly affected by the religious beliefs of the host organization (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989); in these cases, the motivation for running a preschool is primarily financial. In 1990, there were 1,636 Christian preschools in Japan, of which two-thirds were Protestant and one-third Catholic; these numbers represent approximately 10% of preschools, which numbered 14,988 in 1990 (Christianity Almanac, 1990). I was unable to find any report of the number of preschools affiliated with Buddhist temples, but 40% of Buddhist temples raise funds through nonreligious activities, and among these activities, running a preschool is one of the most common. The most committed Buddhist directors are members of the Buddhist Nursery and Kindergarten Association; this association reports membership of 598 child care centers and 763 preschools (Japan Buddhist Nursery and Kindergarten Association, 1998).

2. In Japan, it is essentially impossible to gain access to preschool staff without some assistance from an intermediary. The faculty and officials who assisted with introductions were asked to select randomly among institutions falling within the categories established by the researcher (e.g., public vs. private preschools).

3. I have conducted several studies of Japanese education and child rearing over the past 15 years and authored numerous publications on these subjects (Holloway, 1988, in press; Holloway, Fuller, Azuma, Kashiwagi, & Gorman, 1990; Holloway, Kashiwagi, Hess, & Azuma, 1986). The data reported in this article were collected during a 6-month stay in the Kansai area sponsored by Fulbright. I have moderate proficiency in Japanese. During all interviews and observations, I was accompanied by a native Japanese speaker who was either a professional in early childhood education or developmental psychology.

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